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TALMUDICAL MISCELLANIES.

I.

SIFRE HOMEROS, BOOKS OF ENTERTAINMENT.

THERE are mentioned in the Talmud and Midrash about half-a-dozen times certain books, under the heading Sifre Homeros, or Sifre Mirom, Miron, Miros, Hamiros, Humiros. R. Nathan ben Jechiel¹ offers three explanations, viz., (a) heretical books; (b) books of a certain heretic, by the name of Mirom; (c) books of Greek wisdom, called in Greek (Hamirom) Homiros.

The first explanation is based on the Hebrew root *mûr*, Hiphil *hemûr*, which means change, hence Sifre Hemirom signifies books of apostates, who changed their faith, becoming untrue to Judaism.²

The second theory starts from the same root, with the additional remark, however, that the title of these books is taken from the proper name of a heretical author. This is the opinion of R. Gershom, whom R. Nathan follows, without mentioning the source.³

In the third explanation R. Nathan follows—likewise without giving credit to his authority—the interpretation of R. Hai Gaon,⁴ who refers perhaps to Homeros, the well-known Greek poet, the supposed author of the renowned Greek epic which bears his name.

This latter is, indeed, the clearly defined opinion of David de Lara,⁵ Benjamin Mussafia,⁶ David Luria,⁷ and David Cassel.⁸ Azaria De Rossi,⁹ while he knows of this explanation, rejects it, and prefers to derive the word from the Greek adjective *moros*, so that Sifre Homoros means books of nonsense, stupid books.

Grätz¹⁰ finally—whom J. Lewy¹¹ seems to follow—thinks of *ἡμερησία βιβλία* chronicles (of Jewish kings or heroes).

¹ In article מִרוֹם, see our *Aruch Completum*, v. 252.

² Thus also in the *Commentary of R. Obadiah Bartinora to Jadaim*, iv. 6.

³ To be found in his *Commentary to Chulin*, 60^b. *MS. Vaticana (Angelica*, p. 316), the copy of which is in my possession, and from it reprinted in the Wilna edition of the Talmud.

⁴ *Commentary to Jadaim*, l.c.

⁵ *Kether Kehuna*, l.c.

⁶ Article מִרוֹם.

⁷ *Commentary to end of Koheleth Raba*.

⁸ In his edition of *Meor Enajim*, ch. iv., p. 84, note 4.

⁹ *Meor Enajim*, l.c., and ch. lvii., p. 462.

¹⁰ *Monatsschrift*, xix., p. 138.

¹¹ *Dictionary I*, p. 476.

Looking closely into the matter we shall soon become convinced that all these suggestions are untenable. From the Mishnah, quoted in the footnote 2, we learn that these kinds of books were of no value, and according to the Babylonian Talmud,¹ were deserving of being burned. The Jerusalem Talmud² pronounces, however, in regard to these books, a much milder judgment. This important account reads as follows: "R. Akiba says,³ 'He also (has no share in the future life) who reads exoteric books,' for instance, the books of Ben Sirah, Ben Lana. But he who reads books of Hamirom, or any books composed from this time (when the canon of the twenty-four books of the Bible was closed), is considered as having read a letter. What is the reason thereof? Because it is written,⁴ 'And furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.' They are given for the musing mind, but not for weary study."

The same is to be found in the Midrash,⁵ with some variations.

There can be no question that the Jerusalem Talmud did not refer to the books of Homer, for if such an excellent book as that of Ben Sirah (Jesua Sirah),⁶ of whose gnomes about forty are quoted in Talmud and Midrash, and which obviously was not prohibited from public use, is, in the above account, nevertheless declared to be discarded from study under the penalty of losing the future life, how much the more would this verdict be applicable to Homer, whose books contain narrations of fictitious events, fabulous personages and legends of such strange diction and polytheistic colouring that they must needs have been considered from the point of view of Judaism as so many types of idolatry. On the other hand, we cannot maintain Grätz's suggestion, for if the Sifre Homeros chronicles related to Jewish heroes, why should they be so severely judged as to be declared worthy of being burnt, and in case they contained some scandalous accounts or records, why, on the other hand, should their perusal be regarded as harmless as reading a letter?

¹ *Chul.* 60^b, where the words, "Like the books of Homeros" are omitted in our editions, but they are preserved for us by R. Gersom, R. Nathan and Azaria De Rossi.

² *Ab. Zara*, x., 28^a, mis-quoted by Mussafia and Grätz (*Commentary to Koheleth*, p. 166).

³ *Synh.* x. i.

⁴ Ecclesiastes xii. 12.

⁵ *Koheleth Rabba* to xii. 12. Instead of Ben Lana we find there Ben Tagla. See our opinion about them in our *Aruch Completum*, v. 49. "The books of Homeros" are omitted in the Midrash.

⁶ Flourished in the first half of the second century. See Grätz, *History* II.², p. 281, and *Aruch Completum*, ii. 119.

We cannot help abandoning, therefore, all these attempts to explain the meaning of Sifre Homeros.

In my opinion this word is the Greek *ἡμερος* (Himeros), meaning pleasure, entertainment, delight. Such books of entertainment and pleasure were, it goes without saying, in existence in great abundance,¹ besides the so-called books of Apocrypha. They were read as a relaxation, to divert the mind, and for the sake of exhilaration. The Babylonian sages condemned them, but the Palestinian scholars looked upon them in a much more favourable light, and although they did not attach to them any importance whatever, they did not exactly forbid them; on the contrary they permitted them as a diversion for the mind; they declared them, however, as not being a praiseworthy subject for earnest study, which latter could be only claimed for the Holy Writ.

From this point of view we have to consider the Books of Himeros (this is the only true reading), and we are supported in our opinion by the following illustration of the Midrash.² The question, namely: "What did David refer to when saying,³ 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight,' is answered thus: David was anxious to have his words and meditations written down, preserved and engraved for future generations, in order not to be read only like books of Himeros, but that they should be studied as earnestly as the important laws, the study of which is followed by a reward in the future life."

It seems hard to resist the conclusion that the books here referred to are books for leisure and entertainment, which, although considered as profitless in themselves, were none the less tolerated as reading matter⁴ and mind-refreshing diversions, but which were well discriminated from the earnest, absorbing and sanctifying studies of the Sacred Books.

¹ Fox-tales, Washers' gossips were, for instance, wide-spread collections according to Talmudical records. See our *Aruch Completum*, article "Mimshal," v. 166. Acher (Elisa b. Abujah) is said (Chag. 15^b) to have indulged in Greek songs, and exoteric books to have fallen from his lap when he stood up.

² *Midrash Shocher Tob*, beginning of the first chapter; *Talkut*, Psalm, §§ 613 and 678.

³ Psalm xix. 14.

⁴ Cf. *Azariah De Rossi Imre Binah*, ch. II., p. 83 (ed. Cassel), with reference to *Numbers Rabba*, ch. xiv.